

A Snake Icon in Industrial Advertising: Oldsmobile, the 39th Fighter Squadron and *Life* Magazine in 1943

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Snakes, and especially venomous snakes, are well represented as icons on heraldic crests, emblems, patches, and other insignia of the United States armed services (e.g., Stein, 1993, 2007; Hardy and Gingo, 2020; Watkins, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2009, 2013, 2017). Their use may variously represent power, strength, speed, resiliency, tenacity, flexibility, and the danger a unit poses to its enemies. On 18 October 1943 readers of *Life* magazine encountered on (un-numbered) page 9 a striking, full-page, full-color advertisement dedicated to the “*Cobra Cannoneers*” featuring a prominently placed cobra rising above a cloud bank with mouth open and fangs exposed (Figs. 1 and 2). The ad was dedicated to the 39th Fighter Squadron of the U. S. Army Air Corps¹ and simultaneously promoted the industrial productions of the Oldsmobile Division of General Motors in support of the United States war effort in World War II.

The centrally positioned artwork in the ad is a depiction of the official emblem of the 39th Fighter Squadron. The formal description of the squadron emblem reads “On a blue disc bordered in gold a giant cobra poised and ready to strike from behind a cumulus cloud proper” and was approved on 16 April 1941 (Maurer, 1982). Beneath the emblem, and partly obscuring it, on the ad are three Bell P-39 Airacobra aircraft. The largest of the depicted planes shows the squadron emblem painted on the fuselage just below the cockpit. Text on the ad includes “Your snake’s-head insignia is symbolic of your fighting spirit and of the deadly Fire-Power in the noses of your ships.”

The deadly fire-power included a pair of .30-caliber machine guns, a pair of .50-caliber machine guns, and a forward-mounted 37 mm T9 cannon. The cannon was centrally positioned in the nose of the aircraft, protruding and firing through the propeller spinner (Doyle, 2023) and, as the advertisement emphasizes, was effective against aircraft, tanks, trucks, railway locomotives, and small ships. Those cannons were among the many war materials manufactured by Oldsmobile during World War II. But why did an automotive company pay for such a prominent advertisement for a weapon system?



Fig. 1. Cover of the 18 October 1943 issue of *Life* magazine that carried the *Cobra Cannoneers* advertisement.

AUTOMOTIVE COMPANIES AND WAR PRODUCTION

Before the United States entered the war as a combatant nation, the country was, in addition to building up its own capability to wage a modern war, providing military vehicles, aircraft, weapons, and other goods and supplies to the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union. The production demands were extraordinary, obviously destined to expand, and well beyond the limits of what the government alone could meet (Herman,

-to the COBRA CANNONEERS!

OFFICIAL INSIGNIA OF
THE 93RD FIGHTER SQUADRON,
U. S. ARMY AIR CORPS

The sides of their Airacobra fighter planes
are decorated with the asp or venomous
cobra, historic symbol of quick death to
whomever it strikes.



A TOAST TO THE STRAIGHT-SHOOTING, FAST-FLYING MEN OF THE 93RD FIGHTER SQUADRON . . . You're one of the many famous squadrons who fight with "flying cannon." Your snake's-head insignia is symbolic of your fighting spirit and of the deadly Fire-Power in the noses of your ships. You can blast an enemy plane with a single round from your fast-firing cannon. You can stop a tank, destroy a truck, wreck a railway locomotive, or even sink a small ship . . . all with the power of your cannon. More Fire-Power for you!

BACK UP OUR FIGHTING FLYERS . . . BUY WAR BONDS



The boys of the Fighting 93rd, and all our other great squadrons, need your support. They need the equipment your War Bond dollars buy. Back their attack . . . buy your share of Bonds in the Third War Loan Drive.

The "Fangs of the Cobra," the hard-hitting aerial cannon in the noses of Airacobra fighter planes, are a wartime product of Oldsmobile. These powerful automatics shoot either high-explosive or armor-piercing shell . . . at rapid-fire rate . . . and with true "sharpshooter" accuracy. They're precision-built weapons, which Oldsmobile produces in volume. Olds-

mobile also builds two other types of automatic aerial cannon, plus shell and high-velocity cannon for tanks and tank destroyers, plus large caliber shell for the Artillery and the Navy. Keeping 'Em Firing is our wartime job at Oldsmobile . . .

FIRE-POWER
is Our Business!

OLDSMOBILE DIVISION OF GENERAL MOTORS
KEEP 'EM FIRING

Fig. 2. The Oldsmobile advertisement honoring the 39th Fighter Squadron of the U. S. Army Air Corps. In three places the ad incorrectly identifies the squadron as the 93rd Fighter Squadron.

2013). In May of 1940, President Franklin Roosevelt expanded the process of engaging private industry in the development of weapons and equipment by appointing the Council of National Defense Advisory Commission (NDAC). The NDAC included leaders from American businesses and labor (General Motors, U.S. Steel, Amalgamated Clothing Workers, Chicago Burlington Railroad) as well as representatives from the Federal Reserve Board and Securities and Exchange Commission, and an advisor on consumer issues. The NDAC had no legal authority to compel business leaders to cooperate with the war effort but instead drew upon personal connections and shared experiences to convince business leaders to participate. By January 1941 the need for a decision-making body with authority to issue directives became apparent, and the NDAC was replaced by the Office of Production Management, and a year later by the War Production Board, each with increased authority to engage private business in war production, or to re-direct critical materials to higher-priority defense industries (Kennett, 1985; Herman, 2013). Both latter agencies applied pressure to the automotive industry in the United States, first to limit civilian auto production and later to shut it down completely in favor of military production.

On 1 January 1942 new car sales were frozen by the U.S. government; approximately half a million vehicles left on showroom floors across the country were re-purposed for use by the War Department and other essential government agencies (Kennett, 1985). By the middle of February 1942, the last civilian automobiles rolled off assembly lines, and the automotive industry was fully engaged in re-tooling and converting production facilities for wartime production (Clive, 1979; Kennett, 1985; Baime, 2015). By June, not only had production of passenger cars and commercial trucks been halted, but also production of items such as metal office furniture, radios, phonographs, refrigerators, vacuum cleaners, washing machines, and sewing machines (Kennett, 1985). Each company and facility made decisions about contracts to accept from the government for production of materials to support the war effort (Herman, 2013).

General Motors Corporation proved to be a powerhouse of wartime production. It began delivering military weapons and equipment in 1940, and by the end of the war in summer of 1945 all of its over 100 manufacturing plants in the United States were converted for defense production (GM Defense, 2025). In total, General Motors divisions handled government contracts in excess of \$13,797,541,000 (Jackson, 2025a; equivalent to 2025 value of \$247,626,001,387). Oldsmobile was one of five car divisions of General Motors Corporation (which also operated over 20 other component divisions). They operated out of four facilities, located in Detroit, Michigan; Janesville, Wisconsin; Kansas City, Missouri; and Lansing, Michigan. Oldsmobile's total major wartime contracts were \$385,327,000 (Jackson, 2025a; equivalent to 2025 value of \$6,915,506,483). Their wartime production output included aircraft parts, truck axles, and other miscellaneous materials but was dedicated primarily to cannons and muni-

tions. The four combined facilities produced over 45 million shells and projectiles during the war. Between mid-July 1942 and mid-June 1943, the Lansing facility produced 2,779 of the T9 aircraft cannons celebrated in the *Life* magazine advertisement (Jackson, 2025b).

A NEED FOR ADVERTISING

'Institutional advertising' in the United States was common during WWII and was primarily concerned with keeping the name, image, and reputation of a *company*, rather than its products or services, in the mind of civilians during times when that company was not actually producing any goods for civilian consumption (Jones, 2009). The *Cobra Cannoneers* ad is an excellent example of this, emphasizing the patriotic effort of the company to support the war effort, and encouraging the purchase of war bonds, while keeping the Oldsmobile name in front of the American people in a leading magazine of the day. Ads such as these outnumbered all other kinds of ads dealing with industrial support for the war (Jones, 2009).

39TH SQUADRON

The choice of the 39th Fighter Squadron emblem (Figs. 2 and 3) highlighted their use of the P-39 Airacobra plane with the T9 cannon, and simultaneously provided the powerful image of the cobra as an eye-catching allure to draw readers to the ad. The 39th was originally constituted as the 39th Pursuit Squadron in December 1939. They were activated in February of 1940, then redesignated the 39th Fighter Squadron in May 1942, a designation they retained until the end of WWII (Maurer, 1982). They flew in active service in Australia and New Guinea from 1942 through 1944, then were in service in the Pacific theatre, including in the Philippines and Okinawa. The squadron was stationed in Japan after the end of the war. They later served in the Korean war and were deactivated in December 1957 (Maurer, 1982; Stanaway, 1982). The squadron was reactivated as the 39th Tactical Reconnaissance Training Squadron in 1969 (Fig. 4). Apart from short service as a test squadron (Fig. 5) they remained a flying training unit since 1990 and are currently stationed at Randolph Air Force Base in Texas.

Throughout that history the cobra emblem was retained but it was modified in several ways. The early design of the emblem was shown in the Oldsmobile ad (Fig. 2) and is depicted in Fig. 3. In that design the snake's mouth is open, a red forked tongue extending between two exposed fangs (rendered in differing lengths in those two examples). In later designs (Figs. 4, 5, and 6) either two (Fig. 5) or four (Figs. 4 and 6) drops of venom are dripping from the fangs. We were unable to determine when the venom was added to the emblem, nor for what purpose². A special 'morale' patch was issued during the COVID shutdown that featured a festive, holiday version of the emblem in which the cobra dons a Santa Claus hat and drips venom toward Santa's sleigh and



Fig. 3. An early design of the 39th Fighter Squadron jacket-patch. Note the relatively short fangs and the absence of venom drops.



Fig. 4. A colorful version of the emblem of the 39th Flying Training Squadron with four venom drops beneath elongated fangs.



Fig. 5. A shoulder patch from the time when the 39th was designated as a Test Squadron. Here, the cobra has elongated fangs with two drops of descending venom.



Fig. 6. A 'morale' shoulder-patch of the 39th Flying Training Squadron from December 2020 with four venom drops descending toward Santa Claus in his sleigh.

reindeer as they pass in front of the cloud bank below the cobra's head (Fig. 6).

We found several historical photographs that depict the emblem as it was applied on aircraft, or on patches worn by aviators. A reversed emblem (i.e., the cobra is facing to the left as viewed) on the left side of a Bell P-39 Airacobra was published by Stanaway (1982, p. 4); he also provided a pho-

tograph of four officers in 1941 wearing large jacket-patches with the emblem (p. 5; it is not possible to tell whether venom drops were present on those patches). A color photograph of a squadron of P-39 aircraft at Selfridge Field (Michigan) in 1941 also clearly shows the reversed emblem (cobra facing to the left as viewed) on the left side of the first three aircraft in the foreground (Doyle, 2023, p. 51). A photo posted on-

line (Clark, 2011) shows the emblem on the right side of the plane, oriented as it is on the patches we illustrate. When it was stenciled or painted on an aircraft, the emblem appears always to have been oriented so that the cobra faced toward the front of the plane. The sole exception to this that we found was on the artist's rendition of the emblem on the three planes in flight in the *Life* magazine advertisement (Fig. 2).

It is clear from our preliminary exploration of military heraldry that snakes of various kinds are somewhat common in emblems and unit insignia of the armed services of the United States of America. The Oldsmobile advertisement in 1943 is special because it brought this example of reptilian iconography to the attention of a broad audience in the readership of *Life* magazine, one of the prominent magazines of the time in the United States. It serves also to remind us today of the contributions made to the success of United States efforts in WWII by the automotive industry, and the methods they pursued to maintain a connection to the citizens they were temporarily not able to serve through their traditional commercial enterprises.

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NOTES

1. In three places, the ad incorrectly printed the squadron designation as the 93rd Fighter Squadron.
2. We checked two editions of the official military record of the United States Air Force (Maurer, 1982, 1992) and in both the emblem of the 39th Fighter Squadron is depicted with four drops of venom descending from the open mouth of the cobra. The Institute of Heraldry website (<https://tioh.army.mil/Catalog/Heraldry.aspx?HeraldryId=10913&CategoryId=6225&grp=1&menu=Uniformed%20Services>) describes the emblem of the 39th Flying Training Squadron as "On a disc Azure, issuant from base through clouds Proper, a giant cobra poised to strike Braun, breast Or, markings Sable, detailed of the second, langued Gules, eyed, armed and dripping venom Argent, all within a narrow border Blue. Attached below the disk, an {sic} Yellow scroll edged with a narrow Ultramarine Blue border and inscribed "39TH FLYING TRAINING SQ" in Blue letters". That is a description of the emblem we illustrate in our Fig. 4. The cobra is reported there to represent "the tenacity and veracity of the unit's highly qualified instructor pilots. Like cobras, the instructors are highly skilled and respected warriors of their breed" (accessed 25 March 2025).

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